

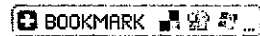


Y.E. Smith Elementary to see 'museum' format, longer school days

By Matthew E. Milliken : The Herald-Sun

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DURHAM -- Starting this summer, teaching and learning at Y.E. Smith Elementary School will have a whole new look.

The Board of Education has approved plans to convert Smith, one of the district's worst schools, to a "museum school" format. Learning units will begin and end with visits to various museums throughout the Triangle, and museum curators will visit the school regularly to teach.

Smith's school day will also be lengthened, with an 8 a.m. start and 4:30 p.m. end.

"I think it's wonderful," said Rod Winstead, whose daughter Tierra Winstead is now a Smith fourth-grader. "It opens the kids' minds to a whole different experience as far as life experience."

Felicia Hester, 40, has a son in fourth grade and a daughter in second grade at the school. When parents were first told about the coming changes in an April 23 assembly, Hester had some qualms about how the students and staff would endure the longer school day. Now, however, she's looking forward to having her children exposed to different cultures.

Her son, Emanuel Hester, is also eagerly anticipating the new school format.

"He loves science, so he wants to know more about it," Felicia Hester said. "So I think it's going to be pretty good for him."

The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., will support Smith's new learning model. Duke's and N.C. Central University's art museums, art departments and other academic departments, the Museum of Life and Science, the Hayti Heritage Center, the Durham Arts Council and UNC's Ackland Art Museum and Morehead Planetarium and Science Center are expected to partner with the school.

Durham Public Schools administrators say that the new museum school will be relatively unusual in that it will continue to draw students exclusively from the Y.E. Smith attendance zone. Many public schools with this format are charter or magnet schools that take students from throughout their districts.

When the format change was presented last week to the school board, member Leigh Bordley could hardly suppress her enthusiasm.

"I wish I had written a song or something that I could perform tonight -- some way I could express how extremely excited I am about this idea," she said.

Not all of her board colleagues were elated. A nonplussed Fredrick Davis noted that the school -- which lags district math and reading proficiency scores by 18 and 25 percentage points respectively and state scores by 30 and 40 points -- has already changed formats three times in the last 17 years. He suggested redistricting the school.

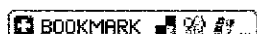
That sparked a passionate response from Chairwoman Minnie Forte-Brown, who called redistricting a matter for another time.

"We can continue to do the same thing that we're doing and we know that we will get the same results," Forte-Brown said. "All over the world, children are being in school longer."

The board unanimously approved the new format, including the longer school hours, but not before a few reservations were voiced.

They mainly stemmed from comments from Mattie Perry Johnson, Smith's library media teacher, who endorsed the new approach but said faculty were concerned about the new work hours.

Administrators say no teacher will have to serve extra hours because the staff will be divided between 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. work shifts. Only a handful of new employees will be needed to accommodate the new format. Instructors who wish to ask for reassignment to a school with traditional hours may do so.



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